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"Where are the Little Girls?" Conceptualising Girlhood in Early Bengali Children's Periodicals

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Abstract

This paper looks at the representation of girls in selected Bangla children's periodicals (Sakha and Sandesh) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which catered to both girls and boys. In this paper, I argue that writings for children, emerge as cultural products tied to a discursive legacy that attempts to regulate and define children's bodies in terms of gender and sexuality. The girl here is less a natural category than a product of evolving, culturally situated, and contradictory discourses.

Keywords*: Gender, Girls, Bangla Children's Periodicals, Childhood.*

Introduction

The representation of girls in children's literature has been a topic of critical examination for a while. Studies have revealed that besides the underrepresentation of female characters, their stereotypical portrayals in literature reinforce gender bias. Such readings illustrate the liberal feminist agenda as they focus on the male/female binary based on similarity and/or difference. Liberal feminism emphasises achieving gender equality through reform within existing societal structures and often employs sex-role theory as a framework for understanding gender dynamics. Sex role theory, rooted in humanistic discourses, posits that social roles are assigned based on biological sex. This paper while exploring sex role stereotypes in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bangla children's periodicals builds on the intersection of gender representation, feminist perspectives, and post-structural theory in children's literature. Poststructuralism challenges fixed categories and explores fluid identities. It invites us to question normative constructs and power dynamics. In the context of children's literature, this perspective allows us to analyze how gender is socially constructed.

Children's Literature and Gender Stereotypes

Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping cultural narratives. It often perpetuates gender stereotypes, buttressing societal norms. A reading of sex-role stereotypes

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in Bangla children's periodicals enables us to uncover underlying power dynamics. When investigating the representations of girlhood in children's literature, it becomes evident that dominant modes of girlhood emerge within specific cultural contexts. These modes often require specific performances of femininity to sustain them. However, what's significant is that these representations are not monolithic—they frequently contain contradictions and engage with cultural battles surrounding gender, sexuality, and power. Deploying post structural approaches allows us understand how girls are positioned within ideological and discursive frameworks. Rather than viewing "the girl" as a static figure, we see her as a contested character whose representation interacts with competing discourses of femininity. While Bangla periodicals conveyed messages intended for children in general, there were instances where a child's sex became synonymous with a gender that prescribed specific behaviours. Interestingly, the division between male and female readers was less pronounced in colonial Bengal than in the West. In Western literature, the creation of distinct reading materials for boys (adventure stories) and girls (domestic tales) reflects a preoccupation with children's sexuality.

Foucault's insights on the invention of children as sexual beings is relevant here as they shed light on the production of materials aimed at disciplining the child's body. According to Foucault by the late 18th century, discipline shifted from punitive measures to constraint and regulation. The prescription of bodily gestures and behaviours through established norms encouraged the development of "docile bodies." Homes and schools emerged as localized sites of power and knowledge, simultaneously defining and containing children's sexuality. Foucault's interventions allow us to explore how childrearing practices contribute to the production of knowledge and power; and, how writings for children serve as significant sites where discourses about sexuality, gender, and childhood intersect. Children's literature, initiated for the amusement and moral development of gendered youth reflects adult preoccupations and anxieties about shaping young minds and bodies. It is within children's literature, that discourses of femininity and masculinity circulate, thereby perpetuating gendered identities.

Research Gap

As far as Bangla children's literature is concerned, except for Sibaji Bandyopadhyay's detailed and insightful intervention on the absence of girl characters in Bangla children's literature there has hardly been any study to delve into the representation of girls. In his *Bangla Shishu Sahityer Chhoto Meyera* [The Female Children of Bengali Children's Literature], Bandyopadhyay analyses the stereotypical presence—or complete absence—of female characters in the literary corpus of Bengali children's literature (particularly, in the primers and fictions).

While previous studies have primarily focused on adventure stories and detective fiction, this paper looks at the representation of girls in selected Bangla children's periodicals (*Sakha* and *Sandesh*) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which catered to both girls and boys. In this paper, I argue that writings for children, emerge as cultural products tied to a discursive legacy that attempts to regulate and define children's bodies in terms of gender and

sexuality. The girl here is less a natural category than a product of evolving, culturally situated, and contradictory discourses.

Early Bangla Children's Periodicals

By the late 19th century, the concept of "home" or the "inner domain" emerged as an alternative space for knowledge production. Unlike the Victorian middle-class household, where home was often a place for rest, the Bengali *bhadralok* viewed home as the "real place for work For the *bhadralok,* home was the space over which they enjoyed complete autonomy and was an arena of self-rule. Metaphors of governance were used in vernacular literature to describe home as "an enterprise to be administered, an army to be led, and a state to be governed."

The publication of children's periodicals played a crucial role in the *bhadralok*'s project of real work, which unfolded within the precincts of the home. These juvenile periodicals engaged in larger debates surrounding childhood and shaped the metaphor of childhood itself. The "inner domain" became a space where children read periodicals meant for extracurricular leisure, and it was here that the future citizens of Bengal were nurtured. By examining these periodicals, we gain insights into an alternate and parallel mode of informal learning—a nationalist pedagogy outside the confines of school walls. This study informs us about how gender roles and representations intersected with cultural, historical, and educational contexts, and shaped the literary landscape for young readers in colonial Bengal.

Childhood in Colonial Bengal

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal, prevailing and emerging concepts of childhood underwent significant shifts. By the mid-Victorian period, childhood was being increasingly defined in terms of boyhood and girlhood and an understanding of adolescence and youth came into play. In the colonial context, childhood in India was ambiguous and undefined due to a lack of consensus on its duration. Also, the differential nature of the childhood experiences complicated any concrete definition of 'childhood'. It would be significant here to briefly note the Age of Consent Debate (1891). This debate was noteworthy in determining the age at which a girl could be considered a woman. The controversy surrounding the Age of Consent Act touched on various issues, however, the most important was establishing the minimum age at which a girl could legally cohabit with her husband. This debate highlighted the complexities of defining the transition from girlhood to womanhood. The colonial authorities viewed the onset of puberty in female native bodies as a significant marker of transition from childhood to womanhood, indicating readiness for reproduction. Interestingly, this perspective overlooked the concept of adolescence, leading to ambiguity in defining the age limit for childhood in India. As a result, the standards for determining the end of childhood continued to fluctuate socially and legally. The differential treatment of childhood based on gender is evident in the varying age limits set for consent and marriage for boys and girls. Historically, girls have been considered to mature earlier than boys, leading to lower age limits for consent and marriage for girls. This resulted in girls having shorter childhoods compared to boys, who typically continued their

childhood into their late teens. The practice of marrying off girls at a young age forced them to transition into adulthood at a very tender age.

Contents of the Periodicals

The periodicals dealt with range of subjects and aimed to educate children through a blend of entertainment and enlightenment. These publications featured sections dedicated to science, natural history, travel accounts, adventurous narratives, hobbies, games, biographies, and various news items. Authored and curated by a select group of progressive and imaginative individuals primarily affiliated with the Brahmo Samaj, the periodicals had a clear mission of influencing young minds, particularly boys, to embody certain ideals essential for the liberation of their homeland. Modelled after metropolitan counterparts, the periodicals showcased stories of intrepid explorers and adventurers to instill a sense of patriotism and a spirit of masculinity in their young readers. While emphasising the allure of far-off lands and the values of modernity and progress, the publications also underscored the importance of physical activities, discipline, and outdoor pursuits to foster a culture of resilience and manliness among their audience. Noteworthy, however, is the observation that despite the concerted efforts to cultivate a sense of masculinity among Bengali youth, the periodicals seemed to uphold traditional notions of femininity, particularly in relation to the portrayal of female characters. Although the periodicals purportedly catered to both boys and girls, creating a shared realm of imagination and a universal childhood, they seemingly overlooked the disparities in experiences between the genders resulting from prevailing societal norms. Subsequent analysis reveals that, despite ongoing debates on women's issues in Bengal, the society remained resistant to notions of female mobility and physical expression.

Girls in the Bangla Juvenile Periodicals

In children's writings of the period, girls are rarely depicted as active characters. When they do appear, they are often portrayed as symbols of feminine grace and submissiveness rather than as children. Societal norms at the time promoted early marriage for girls, depriving them of education and the enjoyment of childhood. This cultural practice of premature adulthood has been criticized for robbing girls of their rightful claim to childhood. Scholars like Tanika Sarkar and S.K Das have questioned the compatibility of childhood and marriage for girls, highlighting how the emphasis on marriage in literature overshadowed the importance of a girl's childhood. Tanika Sarkar raises pertinent questions: Did women have a distinct life stage called childhood? And if so, was it compatible with the institution of marriage?

S.K. Das, in his study of womanhood in Indian literature, observes that pre-twentieth-century literature often neglected the childhood of girls due to the overwhelming emphasis placed on marriage. Once a girl, regardless of her age, entered wedlock, she ceased to be treated as a child. Her marital status effectively erased her childhood from literary narratives.

A close reading of Bengali children's periodicals from the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals a significant ambiguity in the writers' views on the roles and abilities of girls and

women. While they did write extensively for both genders, their outlook towards girls was not impartial. Instead, they often relegated women's roles to the private sphere, showcasing a bias that was prevalent during that time.

The enduring patriarchal notion of confining women to the domestic realm is evident in columns aimed at girls in *Sakha*. While these portrayals do not suggest that girls have less potential than boys, the exceptional qualities attributed to them are often stereotypical. Women are frequently depicted as the epitome of kindness, setting them apart from their male counterparts. Stories like 'Eije Notun Meye' [Hey! New Girl] (*Sakha* 1883) and 'Ushabala' (*Sakha* 1889) draw attention to the compassionate and empathetic nature of girls, promoting the idea of loving others as siblings. In ‘Eije Notun Meye’, a little girl befriends another girl who was otherwise lonely and poor compared to the others in school. Similarly, in ‘Ushabala’, Ushabala, a young girl saves Malati from drowning and eventually they become friends. The writers not only emphasise the kind and sympathetic nature of girls but also teach how everyone should love another girl or boy as her/his sibling. From such writings, we may infer that women were always glorified as symbols of love, sympathy, and warmth and an ideal woman was not only benevolent but also an embodiment of shame and civility. In one of the pieces titled ‘Lajja o Namrata’ [Shame and Grace] (*Sakha* 1888), Binodini, a young girl of fourteen and her father’s favourite, was disliked by her in-laws for her carefree nature. However, as much as Binodini appeared veiled in front of others and tried to present herself as an obedient and ideal young woman, she failed to impress them. On the other hand, another young girl Kamini who happened to be Binodini’s neighbour and of her age, was much loved and praised by all as Kamini was submissive, hardly voiced her opinion, spoke politely, was meek, and appeared veiled all the time. These juvenile Bangla periodicals glorify women as symbols of love, sympathy, and warmth, idealising them as embodying virtue and civility. Characters like Binodini and Kamini exemplify contrasting attitudes towards femininity, with Kamini's submissive demeanour garnering more favour than Binodini's carefree spirit, highlighting societal expectations of women's behaviour.

Many of the pieces highlight the commendable qualities of mercy and aid toward those in need as admirable traits of an honourable woman. This is evident in the story of 'Ramanir Daya' [The Compassionate Woman] (*Sakha* 1887), which recounts a woman's courageous and compassionate actions from Faizabad during the 1857 revolt. Despite facing threats from rebel soldiers, she took in and sheltered a helpless English woman. Additionally, writers depicted women possessing virtues such as modesty, obedience, and politeness as equal to men in crisis, demonstrating courage and bravery when confronted by formidable foes. A tale of the revered Rajput queen Karmadevi in Mukul exemplifies this. In 1746, after the annexation of Chittor by Mughal king Akbar and the death of Rajput king Jaymallya in battle, Karmadevi not only crowned her sixteen-year-old son as the king of Chittor and sent him to the battlefield but also fought alongside her daughter and daughter-in-law until her last breath. Similarly, in *Sakha* (1893), there was a report about women prisoners in Andaman who saved and rescued sailors from the Enterpriser, leading to a reduction in their punishment as a reward for their bravery.

The cited instances underscore the significant emphasis placed on qualities of docility and compliance in women by the writers. These narratives not only highlight traits associated with females but also reaffirm the age-old dichotomy of the good child versus the bad child, albeit with female characters. For instance, in Madanmohan Tarkalankar's Shishushiksha Part 3 (1850), the introduction of Shyama and Bama as female counterparts to Gopal (good child) and Rakhal (bad child) marked a notable shift. Subsequently, Kaminisundari Debi's *Bamabodhika* (1868) introduced Sharada and Barada, representing the bad-rich girl and the good-poor girl respectively. This association of wealth with wickedness and poverty with virtue is further explored in Shrimati** Debi's 'Kar Jeet' [Whose Victory!) (*Sakha* 1884) and Sukhalata Rao's poem 'Dui Rakam' [Two Kinds] (*Sandesh* 1918) where educational outlook distinguishes the good from the bad. In the 'Kar Jeet', Lakshmi is an extremely rude and ruthless girl whom everybody dislikes. Since her father was rich nobody said anything to Lakshmi about her ill temper. However, one day while hitting a simple and innocent girl Kusum for plucking berries from one of the trees, she hurts herself. Seeing her bleed Kusum comes to her rescue forgetting how badly Lakshmi had humiliated her. Kusum takes Lakshmi to a shade and treats and covers her wound. This incident changes Lakshmi as she realizes her fault and gradually evolves into an extremely kind and sympathetic girl whom everybody loves. Again, in 'Dui Rakam' there are two girls and it is their outlook towards education which differentiates the good girl from the bad. Similarly, Subinay Ray's 'Lokkhi Pokkhi' [*Sandesh* 1918] contrasts the virtuous Lokkhi, rewarded for her selflessness, with the malicious Pokkhi, punished for envy and avarice.

In Punyalata Chakraborty's 'Shantoshila' in *Sandesh*, the central character, an 'unruly' girl, faces peril whenever she navigates the streets of Calcutta alone, rather than remaining at home. She encounters challenges such as losing her way or being deceived by unfamiliar men offering assistance. Despite evolving from disobedience to politeness through her experiences, she is depicted as an innocent victim when a stranger at the railway station vanishes after taking her bangles, hinting at the looming threat of sexual violence. This narrative prompts reflections on the girl and her sexuality, outlining the boundaries within which Shantoshila, as a girl, must tread carefully to safeguard herself. The portrayal of Shantoshila as a blameless victim reflects prevalent narratives that overlook the potential agency of the female, typically from upper-class or upper-caste backgrounds.

The writers, therefore, despite their sympathies and respect for women, strongly believed that it was they should possess qualities such as kindness and selflessness to efficiently manage the family and household. This belief was frequently expressed in *Sakha* and *Saathi*. For instance, Haranathbabu's wife Annapurnadebi in 'Meyera Amader Ke' [Who are Girls for Us](*Sakha 1883)*)was portrayed as an able and understanding woman who supported her husband and navigated family crises. Women were also expected to excel in cooking, with Sakha featuring a special column for female readers on recipes and stitching: 'Balikadiger Bishesh Prishtha'[Special Page for Girls] (*Sakha* 1883), 'Balikadiger Bishesh Bishoy: Shelai, No.1&2'[Special Subject for Girls: Stitching, No.1&2] *Sakha* 1885). Furthermore, some pieces such as 'Poshak' [Dress] (*Sakha* 1883), displayed regressive views on women's attire and behaviour, reinforcing notions of femininity and obedience. The editor's strict emphasis

on co and discouragement of ornaments serves to uphold constrictive societal standards. This fixation on modesty and outward presentation only serves to bolster traditional gender stereotypes. Furthermore, the directive given to male individuals to ensure women adhere to particular dress codes, aimed at preserving a delicate appearance while safeguarding against the cold, exposes a paternalistic mindset that seeks to control women's autonomy and decisions.

It is important to note that the writers also reminded the young readers that many successful men have attributed their achievements to the influence and support of their mothers. In the case of figures like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Dwarakanath Lahiri, their deep appreciation for their mothers was well-documented. For young readers, these stories served as a reminder of the role that mothers play in shaping the lives of their children.

The stories and columns in these periodicals played a crucial role in highlighting the qualities of women and addressing the challenges they faced in a patriarchal society. Authors urged young male readers to recognize the strength and potential of women, emphasizing the need for them to support women in becoming independent and educated individuals. Through these narratives, readers were sensitized to issues such as child marriage, maternal and infant mortality rates, and domestic violence. The writers advocated for social reforms to improve the lives of women, urging readers to resist harmful practices like child marriage and alcoholism. Pyarishankar Dasgupta in 'Shishu Swasthya Raksha' [Protection of Child's Health] (*Sakha* 1884) elaborates on the ill effects of child marriage and links it to poor economic conditions, frail health (of both parents and children), and lack of proper education. According to him, malnutrition, ill health of women due to early childbirth, poverty, and premature deaths are all consequences of child marriage. He appeals the young readers to resist and thwart the efforts of their parents who support child marriage. In *Sakha*, we also come across instances of men torturing women, which was very often the result of alcoholism. In 'Sura o Banga Nari' [Liquor and Bengali Woman] (*Sakha* 1890), Bipinbehari Sen depicts how alcoholism leads to the disruption and breaking of an otherwise prosperous family. It ruins not only the life of the victim that is Ram Babu but everyone around him especially his innocent wife Nirada. This piece is based on a true story in which Nirada is a victim of domestic violence and is beaten and tortured by Ram Babu. In the end, Nirada commits suicide. The writer considers alcoholism as the root of all evil and the primary reason for the suffering of the helpless women of Bengal. The writers and editors of these juvenile periodicals were vocal about promoting gender equality and empowering women in society.

However, *Sandesh*, in contrast to *Sakha*, lacks any representation of women in its content. While *Sakha* included stories with female protagonists, published biographies of notable women, and discussed women's issues, *Sandesh* eliminated the feminine perspective. For instance, in 'Hotu Bidyalankar' (*Sakha* 1890), the writer laments that in times past, India celebrated erudite women such as Maitri, Gargi, Khona, and Lila, whose intellectual prowess and contributions were revered. He regrets that the contemporary landscape seemed bereft of such remarkable women, a decline attributed by some to the shifting political dynamics of the

nation. Amidst this scarcity, he recounts the life of Rupamanjari of Burdwan district, a figure born in the 12th century into a Vaishnava household. Rupamanjari, later known as Hotu Vidyalankar, distinguished herself through her mastery of grammar, literature, and medicine, a rare feat for her time. Choosing a path less travelled, she remained unmarried and dedicated herself to scholarly pursuits and aiding the less fortunate. The writer believed that her legacy stood as a beacon of inspiration, offering solace in an era which witnessed the gradual decline of Bengal and its rich culture. In contemplating Rupamanjari's legacy, the writer extols her skills, generosity, and unwavering commitment to knowledge. He poses a poignant question to female readers, inviting them to ponder if they too aspire to emulate Rupamanjari's intellectual achievements. In a nation where women of Rupamanjari's calibre are born, their accomplishments stand as a testament to the pride and potential of their country.

The absence of female voices and stories in *Sandesh* is a notable contrast to the more inclusive approach taken by *Sakha* towards women. The lack of representation of women in *Sandesh* raises questions about the periodical's commitment to diversity and gender equality. By not focusing on or including the voices and experiences of women. *Sandesh*'s fell short of promoting gender equality and inclusivity in its content.

Neither Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury nor Sukumar Ray focused on women even though their daughters or sisters (Sukhalata Rao, Priyamvada Devi) regularly contributed as female writers in *Sandesh*. Except for 'Thandidir Bikram' [Grand Aunt's Might] (*Sandesh* 1919) and 'Hingshuti' Tale of the Jealous Girls] (*Sandesh* 1914), one hardly comes across female protagonists in the writings which appeared in Sandesh. The narratives of 'Hingshuti' and 'Thandidir Bikram' delve into themes of conflict, jealousy, and societal expectations in Bengali culture. In 'Hingshuti, the resolution of differences among five young girls by two elderly women highlights the stereotypical association of females with jealousy. Meanwhile, 'Thandidir Bikram' portrays the courage of a Bengali woman in catching thieves, only for the focus to shift to her husband claiming credit in court. Jaychandra Babu appeared at the court instead of *thandidi* because she was *boumanush* [a housewife] and her appearance at the court (which would entail crossing the threshold/domestic space and exposing herself to the public gaze) would have brought shame to her family. The stories also reflect the puritanical views of the Brahmos regarding women's appearances and roles, mirroring the contradictions and limitations of modernity among the *bhadralok* in colonial Bengal. These narratives serve as a window into the complexities and paradoxes inherent in the societal norms and values of the time.

Conclusion

The writings on womanly virtues and evils in late nineteenth-century India were predominantly male-defined, despite being authored by progressive Brahmos or liberal Hindus. These editors and writers, while advocating for women's education, often had a limited vision of women's emancipation. They were apprehensive about the potential impact of education on women, aiming to educate them only to the extent of making them better wives capable of basic tasks like writing letters and keeping accounts.

This ambivalence towards women's education and freedom stemmed from the complex interplay between tradition and modernity during that period. As a sense of national identity emerged, some intellectuals believed that secluding women was necessary to prevent them from engaging in behaviour deemed inappropriate due to education. The focus on the physical attractiveness of girls in juvenile periodicals further underscored the emphasis on maintaining traditional values and roles for women.

In such a patriarchal society, men retained complete control over women's lives, even as they espoused Western ideals of equality and modernity. Women were expected to conform to orthodox values and behaviours, with any resistance viewed as antagonistic. Despite the rhetoric of women's freedom and empowerment, the reality was a world where men dictated the course of women's lives, emphasizing moral and spiritual reformation over genuine autonomy.

It would be pertinent to mention here that the absence of direct mention of female sexuality in literature intended for or about girls and women significantly shapes the perception of femininity. Jacqueline Rose observed that the persistent denial of sexuality in discussions on origins and gender differences centres around the child. The discourse surrounding femininity necessitates ongoing reinforcement to define the girl as a subject, with unspoken implications being just as influential as explicit statements. Moreover, Cahill highlighted how the spectre of sexual violence contributes to shaping the feminine body in contemporary society, emphasising the discipline imposed on women through the fear of sexual violation. These insights suggest that narratives of 'girlhood' in colonial Bengal mirror the prevailing themes of feminine purity and fragility, portraying young girls as in need of protection and salvation by their male counterparts or adults.

The Bangla juvenile periodicals discussed in this reading did not challenge the established model of middle-class girlhood. The agency of girls was not portrayed as they did not engage in even fictional actions, and they remained confined to domestic roles. Despite the texts introducing new opportunities for education, travel, and self-expression among children, the depiction of girls continued to be limited by societal expectations. The girls in these periodicals can be seen as modern subjects, as described by Foucault, who are shaped by punishment and control. The representation of girls in Bangla children's periodicals becomes a battleground for conflicting ideas about gender and sexuality.

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